

University of Wollongong

Research Online

Faculty of Arts - Papers (Archive)

Faculty of Arts, Social Sciences & Humanities

2006

Noisy, smelly, dirty dogs: a sensorial autoethnography of living with dogs

Fiona Borthwick

University of Wollongong, fiona@uow.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/artspapers>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Borthwick, Fiona, Noisy, smelly, dirty dogs: a sensorial autoethnography of living with dogs 2006.
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/artspapers/1643>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

ACSPRI CONFERENCE 2006
Stream: New Ethnographies
Refereed Paper

**NOISY, SMELLY, DIRTY DOGS: A SENSORIAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF
LIVING WITH DOGS**

Dr Fiona Borthwick
Faculty of Arts
University of Wollongong

Email: fiona@uow.edu.au
Telephone: 4221 4972

ABSTRACT

There are many accounts of the current strong connection between dogs and some humans. These accounts imply or pre-suppose a strong social-sensual relation between dogs and their humans. In a highly visualised culture how is this social-sensual relation mediated? What role does olfaction play? Autoethnography and 'mystory' are methodologies that can be used to address these questions.

NOISY, SMELLY, DIRTY DOGS: A SENSORIAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF LIVING WITH DOGS

... sensuous evocation is not just a way of enlivening ethnographic description, or of infusing scholarship with sensuality. It is an essential basis for exploring how peoples make sense of the world through perception (Howes 2003: 43).

Smell has been 'silenced' in modernity (Classen, Howes, Synnott 1994: 4).

INTRODUCTION

Why historically have and currently do humans have such a strong connection to dogs? Some of the answers to this question lie in the co-evolution of both species which started many thousands of years ago (Newby 1999: 5-29) and range up to current accounts based in pets providing ontological security in late-modern societies (Franklin: 1999). Other reasons include, the shift in cultural meanings of animals from things to be used to something with which humans can empathise, and a shift in dog ownership as entertainment to being for companionship (Franklin: 2006)¹. Dogs fulfill the role of companion in many obvious ways, for example, a dog is always there, basically behaves in a consistently friendly way towards its human, does not judge its human, wags its tail in response to its human and engages enthusiastically with its human.

All of these factors are underpinned with the relationship between dogs and their humans as one based in culturally mediated sensual-social relations (on social relations as sensual relations see Howes 2003: 55-56). These sensual-social relations are located in a sensorium. 'By the sensorium we mean here the entire sensory apparatus as an operational complex' (Ong 1969: 6). Ong argues that culture brings man (in original) 'to organize his sensorium by attending to some types of perception more than others, by making an issue of certain ones while relatively neglecting other ones' (1969: 6). David Levin (1993: 1-8, 1999), amongst many others, argues that we live in an ocularcentric age or within a hegemony of vision and that metaphysics is rooted in vision. Vision and audition dominate the sensorium conceptually, how we know things, and experientially within and through a mediated culture. Sight and hearing also form the conceptual/practical bases of the dominant forms of ethnography and anthropology. The paper is a very limited sensorial autoethnography of living with my dogs. The autoethnography is, inevitably, located in the cultural meaning systems and practices within which I live and it shows how the senses influence/construct dogs into being more like humans than dogs, which perhaps, shows less tolerance to the otherness of dogs than we/I would commonsensically think.

Within an ocularcentric culture² how do I experience the necessarily social-sensual relations with my dogs? Given the dominance of vision in our

sensorium, and following the hierarchicalisation of the senses that all cultures have, the dominant sensory relation is through sight - seeing the dogs playing, wagging their tails, turning their heads to understand what I am trying to explain to them etc. Touch and hearing would follow after sight. Olfaction is usually considered one of the lower order senses, with taste, and has been marginalised within everyday experiences and cultural systems. How does olfaction mediate the relationship between my dogs and I? How does the interplay between the senses affect this social relation? Is part of the current strong connection to dogs based in social-sensual relations that challenge those of highly mediatised and individualised societies? These questions are framing the concerns of the paper and are only addressed briefly and indirectly within the current format. How did I write this paper? The paper is written using elements of 'mystory' (1989) and autoethnography (Richardson 2000, Holt 2003) and firstly does a type of 'mystory' to investigate the social-sensual relations between dogs and their human and then reflects on why actually do a 'mystory' and not, for example, an ethnographic study of pet owners.

To engage with these questions I have written some vignettes from my everyday experiences with my dogs, Xena warrior princess and Alice often in wonderland. Both dogs are a mixture with Alice, five years old and a big-eared beauty, being much more whippet than probably Staffordshire bull terrier and Xena, nine years old, is a potent mixture of Staffordshire bull terrier and some unknown others probably gun dogs. Alice has a good ear, eye and nose and Xena is pretty much all nose, especially when a youngster. The paper is presented in the order in which it was written, with the justification of method being placed in the secondary position behind the central part that engages with the social relations between dogs and their human.

ON THE TRAIL WITH THOSE SMELLY, NOISY, DIRTY DOGS

Looking/Sniffing.

On this particular day we were walking through a cemetery with dogs and humans off the leash just wandering around. Suddenly the signs appeared - ears pricked, head up and darting from side to side, legs propelling body faster to reach the goal. "Oh no, what is she looking for now?" The more notorious dog had hit the scent trail and I yelled, too late to make an impact, but still I kept yelling. In reading the signs, and based on experience, this dog was looking for the origin of the odour which would be a dead thing, poo (animal or human) or leftover human food (all categories of food for the dog). She found the odour's origin, rolled in it and seemed very pleased with herself. I couldn't see anything on her or what she had rolled in so had to do the 'bend over and sniff test'; the result: disgusting, presumed to be a dead thing. The full dog package inevitably requires a very thorough dog bath and collar wash.

The sensory relations in this experience are based in vision and olfaction. I see the dog looking/sniffing for what, to me, is an unknowable object and then I sniff the dog to see if I can identify the source of the odour. How are these sensory relations constructed and how do they form and mediate the connection between animal and human as social relations? This is vision in a Kantian form in which the seen object remains in its place as it is conceptualised (Kant 1974) and not vision that affects and enters the body (Borthwick 2006). I am looking at the dog as an object that is doing something that is undesirable to me; the dog is conceptualised through culturally-mediated vision and held in the field of vision through this conceptualisation. The dog is being looked at in order to control and monitor her behaviour. I am not immersed in the experience of seeing the dog. In smelling the dog, the odour particles from an invisible origin enter my body with great affect, with disgust, and with a desire to push away the sensation caused by the particles in my body. Briefly there is an immersion in the experience of olfaction. In bending over and sniffing the dog I get lost in the disgust produced by the odour. Only after this do I conceptualise/see 'a dead thing' as the source. The dog stinks, has particles of dead thing on her and is overwhelmingly a DOG, that for dog reasons, is trying to cover her smell and, in doing this, is much less my humanised companion. In contrast, the olfactory mediation after the dog has had a bath and effectively smells like a deodorised human and is much more my humanised companion.

Smelling and Smelly Dogs

Constance Classen (1993) charts the decline in the social and cultural importance of odour and the rise in importance of vision as beginning in the Enlightenment. The odours of perfume remained popular, but Classen argues that: 'odour was losing its force as a metaphor for truth and an indicator of the sacred reality behind the false world of appearances. It was now sight that was increasingly regarded as the revealer of truth, while fragrance was on its way to becoming purely cosmetic' (1993: 28). Currently (cf Classen 1993: 36), odour is something to be controlled through various deodorising products (for different parts of the home, the car, parts of the body, the dog) and to be avoided if uncontrolled (like a sweat-drenched and deodorant-free gym attendee or a farty fellow commuter). Even the nose's role of interpreting the edibility of spoilt food has been minimised by the practice of 'use-by' dates.

Out in the park again, wandering around the ovals and playing ball. A stranger and his dog appear up the stairs. The dog rushes over and Alice, the whippet-cross, adopts her survival position of collapse and roll. This is a pattern of behaviour that exposes her genitalia to the visiting dog who proceeds to thoroughly sniff her nether regions. The dog's human and I make casual conversation, 'What kind of dog is that?' 'How old is your dog?' The sniffing continues, the dog is pushing his nose around Alice's rear end. The humans are looking at this and still casually talking. The time passes and the humans start to

shuffle, look away, not notice the dogs, then notice them, and eventually it gets too much: 'Okay Alice that's enough, up you get, let's go' The dog's response to this is to remain in survival position. The other dog's owner has also started, 'C'mon, no more' 'Bob, get out of it'. The final command comes with a light push from a human foot. The dogs and humans break up and go on their separate walks. Why do humans find sniffing, as a form of knowing and communicating in dogs, so troubling? How does seeing this activity mediate social relations between humans/humans and humans/dogs?

The interplay between vision and olfaction mediates the relationship between each of the humans and between the dogs and the humans (bringing out the dog's animality). I am watching my dog being sniffed and I am looking at and talking to, the sniffing dog's human. The object being observed is based in olfaction, but odour is not directly experienced by the humans. The faecal, urinal or other odour particles are not entering human noses so the discomfort is not caused by actual odours. Arguably, the discomfort comes from humans identifying a strong connection to his/her dog to the extent that the dogs' very dog-like behaviour is seen through human cultural values as being rude and generally unacceptable; the idea that 'your dog sniffing my dog's genitalia is like you sniffing mine' is disturbing to the humans. This is humans seeing themselves in the position of the dogs and being configured in a social-sensual relation based in olfaction. Odours are air borne particles and cannot be controlled; they move, permeate boundaries and enter bodies at will. 'Such a sensory model can be seen to be opposed to our modern, linear worldview, with its emphasis on privacy, discrete divisions, and superficial interactions' (Classen, Howes and Synnott 1994: 4-5).

Watching my dog's behaviour raises thoughts like 'Oh! This is embarrassing' as she stays on ground for what seems like a long time being 'olfactorily' probed by another dog. In each situation, whether I actually feel uncomfortable depends on the reaction of the other person/people. If he/she seems uncomfortable then I can become that way too and, in seeing my dog in this state, her dog-ness or animality is made much clearer. The unease is also related to the dog's passivity and lack of self-protection which in some way is transferred to her human. Perhaps in this social-sensual relation my animality is also made apparent. Horkheimer and Adorno suggest: 'Hence the sense of smell is considered a disgrace to civilization, the sign of lower social strata, lesser races and base animals' (1979: 184). Pleasure through olfaction can only be taken by the civilised man through efforts to find and destroy 'bad' smells, this gives an 'unrationalized pleasure in the experience' (Horkheimer and Adorno: 184). Sniffing as an activity of communication or to gain knowledge about something is a culturally under-used sense. Even seeing olfaction being used by dogs seems to disturb humans' sensibilities.

HOW DID I WRITE THIS PAPER?

Usually method comes first to explain and justify the contents of the paper. This paper is structured in the order in which it was written. The first part was written with sensorial anthropology as the conceptual framework of paying attention to a culture's sensorium and sensory practices. However, it does not account for the writing practice that describes quotidian events written as vignettes of everyday life. The second part of the paper acts as a classificatory device to explain the writing practice and to locate the practice within an academic convention. Autoethnography and Ulmer's 'mystory' approach can be used to interpret my living/reflecting/writing experience. This style of writing is a claim to a specific voice-in-action, as a chance to speak an embodied self into a text as a confrontation to the capacity of academic conventions to silence the affect that a specific body, not the textualised Body, has on researching and writing. This writing style may also be an effect of living within an increasingly individualised culture (discussed below); while also knowing that individual experiences, the 'individual' itself, is temporally, culturally, socially located and bound. My experiences of my dogs, Alice in Wonderland and Xena Warrior Princess, are peculiarly mine but they also resonate with other dog owners and are experienced and meaningful to me, and others, by being culturally mediated. I am not representing 'dog owners' or making claims beyond my experiences as being an engagement with theory and the representation of the knowing/being embodied self.

The paper has elements of mystory and autoethnography. Writing a "mystory" relates a personal experience with three levels of discourse: personal (autobiography), popular (community stories, oral history) and expert (disciplines of knowledge) (Ulmer 1989: 209). This process brings together artificial memory (stored in books, computers, and film) and lived memory. As Ulmer describes it, the "mystory" text is a selection of fragments chosen to highlight the chance associations that occur in the three levels of discourse. Ulmer: 'The best response to reading a mystory would be a desire to compose another one, for myself' (1989: vii). The paper has clear elements of a mystory as a personal recounting of experiences that are interpreted through the discipline of sensorial anthropology but it lacks community stories or oral histories. It fits the broad definition of autoethnography 'as a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context' (Reed-Danahay 1997: 9). The vignettes above are short pieces of writing about my self and self-other relations within a particular culture. But they tell little of my life outside the interactions described with my dogs; they are in no way an attempt to narrate my life.

But why engage in a writing of the self when this gives academic conventions of justification and verification such trouble (Holt 2003) and gives me a similar amount of trouble in assessing the value and validity of my work? Why not engage in an ethnographic study of pet owners through interviews and

participant observation that would easily fit into the conventions of academic writing? These are questions to myself that I can only partially answer. I am curious about how I live in the world and this manifests itself in an engagement with the theory and everyday practices that I am connected to, and feel compelled to explore, through self-reflective writing. This is how I learnt as an undergraduate and still learn as an academic. The explanation I cannot know for sure concerns whether this compulsion to write in ways that overtly include the self are cause and effect of living in an individualising culture. Writing in a self-reflective way is supported, facilitated and encouraged by this culture so it's an effect of the culture AND an increasing interest and acceptance helps to cause or at least sustain this focus on the individual. But, from another angle, this writing of a specific embodied self is also a way to claim a discursive space in which to make a claim for some kind of authenticity in the face of being simultaneously individualized and homogenized within current highly mediated cultural practices. Perhaps being drawn to theorising social relations as overtly sensuous relations is a response to academic approaches that privilege visuality and to cultural ways of being and cultural practices that are less viscerally embodied (for example, seeing shocking images on TV have a visceral affect and are clearly experienced but are mediated representations which are a much less directly and irrefutably visceral experience than washing runny human poo off a happy, smelly dog). Perhaps also writing my experience is a claim to subjectivity, a representation of self that appears coherent, in an otherwise fragmenting culture. If philosophy and social theory have diagnosed the times well and the self is fragmented and individualised, then writing the self as an embodied sensuous self is a claim to be this in the face of prevailing cultural possibilities.

CONCLUSION

Writing about olfaction is an exhumation of this conceptually 'lost' sense to show how, in an ocularcentric culture, odours are epistemologically and ontologically relevant experiences. As part of the exhumation, writing about the senses places sensory-based everyday practices into the symbolic so that they are seeable in ways that may open spaces for a different kind of politics (see Feldman 1994). An anthropology of social-sensual relations is a way to 'see' dogs differently, to notice how strongly and in what specific ways they are connected to humans.

ENDNOTES

¹ This is a very simplified account of the theories on the connections between dogs and humans.

² There is a long history in the West of classifying the senses hierarchically and as five discrete bodily functions. Sensorial anthropology argues for studying how the senses are meaningful through their interplay and questions the limitations of five senses. For brevity's sake only olfaction and vision are analysed here.

REFERENCES

- Borthwick, F (2006) 'Categorising the Senses, Blurring the Lines: Kant, Derrida, Experience', *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*.
- Classen, C. (1993) *Worlds of Sense*, London: Routledge.
- Classen, C., Howes, D., Synnott, A. (1994) *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell*, London: Routledge.
- Feldman A (1994) 'From Desert Storm to Rodney King via ex-Yugoslavia: On Cultural Anaesthesia' in *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity*, N. Seremetakis, (ed) Boulder: Westview Press.
- Boulder: Westview Press.
- Franklin, A. (1999) *Animals & Modern Cultures: A Sociology of Human-Animal Relations in Modernity*, London: Sage.
- Franklin, A (2006) *Animal Nation*, Sydney: UNSW Press.
- Kant, I. (1974) *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans M. J. Gregor, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Holt, N (2003) 'Representation, Legitimation, and Autoethnography: An Autoethnographic Writing Story', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 2(1).
- Horkheimer, M. & Adorno, T. (1979) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans J. Cumming, London: Verso.
- Howes, D. (2003) *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Newby, J. (1999) *The Animal Attraction*, Sydney: ABC Books.
- Ong, W. (1967) *The Presence of the Word*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Levin, D. (ed) (1993) *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, Berkely: University of California Press.
- Levin, D. (ed) (1999) *Sites of Vision*, Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Reed-Danahay, D (1997) 'Introduction', *Auto/ethnography : rewriting the self and the social*, New York, Berg.
- Richardson, L (2000) 'Writing A Method of Inquiry' in *The handbook of Qualitative Research* N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln (eds), 2nd ed, Thousand Oaks, Sage.
- Ulmer, G. (1989) *Teletheory, Grammatology in the Age of Video*, New York, Routledge.